

Roisin Cossar

Teaching the Renaissance in Manitoba – Canada

Winnipeg, Manitoba is a city of about 750,000 people situated in the middle of the North American continent at the confluence of two river systems, The Canadian prairies open to the west, with the rocky Canadian Shield to the east. To the north lie lakes, rivers, and forests, and to the south, the American states of Minnesota and North Dakota. For centuries, the area was a meeting place for aboriginal peoples, and from the seventeenth century it was also a destination for Europeans working in the fur trade. In the early nineteenth century, the area became a colony for predominantly Scottish settlers, but a large Métis (mixed European/aboriginal) population was also present. In 1870, the province of Manitoba joined the Canadian confederation, and in 1874 the city of Winnipeg was incorporated. Winnipeg was most prominent in Canada during the early decades of the twentieth century, as a rail hub for the grain trade. It was sometimes labelled “The Chicago of the North”. Reflecting the aspirations of its grain barons, those years saw the foundation of important European-inflected cultural institutions such as the Winnipeg Art Gallery (<http://wag.ca/>), and major parks planned by students of Frederick Law Olmstead (<http://www.assiniboinepark.ca/about/park-story.php>). During the same period, while it was still Canada’s third largest city, it was also a centre of labour unrest and progressive politics. In more recent decades, other Canadian prairie cities (such as Calgary and Edmonton in petroleum-endowed Alberta) have overshadowed Winnipeg, and its population base has changed,

as large numbers of non-European immigrants arrive from outside Canada. About one in ten Winnipeggers are aboriginal or Métis. The changing demographics of the city have impacted its universities, and may have some influence on the decreasing demand for courses on traditional topics such as Renaissance studies during the past two decades. At the same time, the priorities of the university system are shifting away from traditional humanities disciplines in favour of a focus on modern, commercially exploitable issues (for a list of these issues at UM, see

http://umanitoba.ca/admin/president/strategic_plan/2294.html). This development clearly threatens the status of Renaissance studies as an integral part of the university’s mission. Faculty members at universities across the city are responding to these issues in creative ways.

The city is home to three universities. The University of Manitoba (UM) (<http://umanitoba.ca/>) is the largest, a comprehensive medical-doctoral institution founded as an agricultural college in the same year as the province of Manitoba was created. It sits in the south of the city, on a bend of the Red river. The University of Winnipeg (UW: <http://www.uwinnipeg.ca/>), primarily an undergraduate institution in the city centre, was founded as United College in 1938. The newest university in the city is The Canadian Mennonite University (CMU: <http://www.cmu.ca/>), a Christian institution founded after the amalgamation of several smaller colleges in the

1990s. Students at all three universities are most often from Manitoba and northern Ontario.

There is strong Renaissance teaching in literary studies at these universities. At the University of Manitoba there are two literature specialists in the English Renaissance, teaching at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Professor Glenn Clark

(http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/departments/english_film_and_theatre/faculty/faculty_details.php?id=1282365864) teaches two-term undergraduate courses on Shakespeare almost every year. Courses on non-Shakespearean Renaissance drama, 16th and 17th century poetry and general literature, and courses on special topics in Renaissance literature and culture are also offered regularly. Professor Judith Owens (http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/departments/english_film_and_theatre/faculty/faculty_details.php?id=6134749756) has taught graduate courses on Spenser and Ireland, and on Renaissance women writers and their contemporaries. Most undergraduate courses in Renaissance literature emphasize instruction in literary form and genre in historical and cultural (particularly material) context. Discussion of literary theory, including various post-structuralist and materialist approaches, is included in most classes, though not as extensively as in graduate seminars. At CMU, part-time faculty members offer undergraduate courses in Shakespeare regularly. The enrolment for these courses holds steady at around 16 students. The survey course is mostly canonical authors; at least one Shakespeare play and one non-Shakespearean play, a great deal of poetry, and *Paradise Lost*. The Shakespeare class focuses on the plays, though the instructor reports she is able to sneak in a few sonnets, here and there.

Previously, the History department at UM was well known as a strong site for both medieval and Renaissance studies. Henry Heller, a respected historian of sixteenth-century France, has taught here for several decades.

Today, however, a strong modernist focus predominates in the departments at UM and UW; UM in particular has a well-earned reputation for innovation in the area of Modern World history. At the same time, there is one fourteenth-century scholar of Italy at UM (Roisin Cossar: <http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/departments/history/members/cossar.html>) and one seventeenth-century specialist working on France and Sweden (Erik Thomson: <http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/departments/history/members/thomson.html>).

Their courses include work on gender, economic history, and the political history of Italy and France between 1300 and 1700, although neither teaches any course specifically on the Renaissance, and the department has recently allowed a graduate seminar on the Renaissance to lapse, since it had not been taught for more than five years. At the University of Winnipeg, Darlene Abreu-Ferreira, a historian of women in sixteenth-century Portugal (<http://www.uwinnipeg.ca/index/history-abreu-ferreira>), teaches senior undergraduate courses on women in the Renaissance and on the history of sexuality from the Renaissance to the present day. None of these department members regularly offers graduate seminars in Renaissance topics, and none has graduate students working in this area.

History and English literature make up the bulk of Renaissance teaching here, with some representation from the faculties of Art and Music. For instance, the Faculty of Music at UM includes a member, Kurt Markstrom, whose research focuses on 18th-century Italian opera (<http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/music/staff/KurtMarkstrom.htm>). The History department at UW also includes an art historian (Claire LaBrecque: <http://www.uwinnipeg.ca/index/art-history-faculty-labrecque>) who teaches Italian and Northern Renaissance Art courses. Finally, at UM some Renaissance literature is taught in Spanish and French, which, together with Italian, comprise a joint department (<http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/departments/fsi/>).

While the profile of Renaissance studies has declined in some areas of the city's universities, interdisciplinary teaching of the Renaissance has become a subject of increasing interest across Winnipeg. Since about 2010, several members of departments at all three universities have been actively exploring ways to combine our teaching and research interests. These conversations gave rise to The Group for Pre-Modern Studies (GPS), a research cluster formed in 2012 to examine the place of pre-modern scholars in the new humanities. (For a schedule of workshops past and present, see http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/departments/humanities/rclusters/premodern_group.html).

GPS is funded by the UM Institute for the Humanities, and meets regularly to discuss issues facing scholars in this area. One question we are exploring in 2012-13 is whether to revive the small Medieval and Renaissance Studies Program at UM. At this point students can complete the program either as a minor or an Advanced major, but the program is very small and normally attracts only one or two students each year. To improve our enrolments and enhance the profile of all premodern scholars in the city and province, we are considering organizing the program around a core, team-taught course, and we have discussed the possibility of coordinating the topics of our regularly-offered courses to allow students in the program to follow a themed unit through several departments during a two or three-year cycle.

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